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THE SOVIET COUP OF AUGUST 1991:  
WHY IT HAPPENED, AND WHY IT WAS DOOMED TO FAIL

by  
William Charles Vogt

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Thesis Advisor:

Mikhail Tsyarkin

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**THE SOVIET COUP OF AUGUST 1991:  
WHY IT HAPPENED, AND WHY IT WAS DOOMED TO FAIL**

by  
**William Charles Vogt**  
Major, United States Army  
B.A., Washington University, 1979

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for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the events in the Soviet Union that preceded the August 1991 coup. In addition, it will examine the failure of the coup itself. Using a methodology of policy analysis, two questions are investigated. The first is why did Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev seemingly align himself with conservatives during the Fall and Winter of 1990-1991? Secondly, once the conservatives were in a position to control the USSR, why did they fail? The first question is answered by showing that Gorbachev's movement away from reform was a pragmatic effort to retain his power as President of the USSR. The second question is answered by presenting evidence that reforms within the USSR had progressed to such a point that the media and the people were able to perform an important role in defeating the coup. The fact that the majority of the Armed Forces failed to support the plotters was also very significant.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE--INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO--FOUNDATION: THE RUMORED COUP OF SEPTEMBER 1991.....	6
CHAPTER THREE--THE SWING TO THE RIGHT.....	21
CHAPTER FOUR--THE PROMISE OF FAILURE.....	32
THE LINKAGE OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC REFORM.....	36
THE GKChP.....	40
THE MEDIA.....	45
THE ARMED FORCES.....	48
THE PEOPLE.....	56
CHAPTER FIVE--CONCLUSION.....	62
NOTES.....	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	77
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST.....	118

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

On the evening of 22 August 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev, the President of the Soviet Union, held a press conference in Moscow to answer questions about the August coup attempt that had failed. The third question that Gorbachev was asked dealt with the eight member Committee for the State of Emergency (GKChP), which had attempted the coup. The reporter who asked the question wanted to know why Gorbachev had put these eight men into positions of power. The reporter pointed out that, in his opinion, "these eight people, at the very moment that they were selected [for positions of power], were obvious scoundrels." <sup>1</sup>

Gorbachev's response was simple and succinct: he stated that he had made a mistake in appointing these men, and that he thought he could trust them.

In fact, Gorbachev's answer was too succinct. The question that the reporter asked is deserving of an in-depth answer. Why did Gorbachev align himself with hard-line, conservative communists, thereby facilitating an attempt to overthrow him? This paper will examine this issue in an attempt to explain what caused Gorbachev to appoint

right-wing conservatives to powerful positions in his reform oriented government. The issue here is not just appointments of conservatives, but removals and resignations of reformers. A key time frame for significant appointments and removals was the period of November 1990-January 1991. This period will be examined in detail in Chapters Two and Three in an effort to better explain Gorbachev's self-proclaimed mistake.

Chapter Four will consider a second question: Once the hard-line conservatives were in a position to take control of the country, why did they fail? Both of these questions will be answered by using a methodology of policy analysis. The events of January 1991 in the Baltics will be examined to show that the hard-liners had begun to take steps to control the country. Yet the conservatives took only limited military action, and abruptly stopped. Had the crackdown continued in January, some say it may have been successful. But the hard-liners hesitated, and this helped ensure their failure.

One can say that the groundwork for the coup was first laid when Gorbachev announced Perestroika and Glasnost. The conservative, hard-line Communists saw this as an attack on their fundamental beliefs and their privileged way of life. Party excesses were revealed to the common Soviet citizen.



The military, KGB, and MVD were all subject to attacks in the media. <sup>2</sup> The attacks bothered the members of the privileged class of Soviet society, and led to one of the base line motives for the coup leaders: greed and selfishness. The men who made up the GKChP, and many more like them, had spent their entire lives struggling to move up the pyramid that was the Communist Party system. Promotions were not necessarily awarded based on merit, but rather on an elaborate scale of patronage and favors. The members of the GKChP had reached the pinnacle of the pyramid. Yet Gorbachev's reforms undermined the pyramid, to the point that the hard-liners feared, unless they took drastic action, the pyramid would crumble.

Related to this issue is the nationalist feelings of the members of the GKChP. A desire to save the Soviet empire was a significant motivating factor for the coup leaders.

When the chips are down, all empire-savers agree that the preservation of the territorial integrity of the state is more important than anything else.

Among today's most obvious empire-savers are the military and the police, the state and party bureaucracies, and members of other "all-Union" structures and apparatuses. For the Moscow bureaucracy, the whole of the USSR, be it Estonia or Armenia, Russia "proper" or Moldavia, Ukraine or Uzbekistan, represents the canvas for its "creative" undertakings. <sup>3</sup>

By combining greed, selfishness, and the desire to save the empire, along with the fear that the old system was rapidly disintegrating, a case can be made for the perceived need of the hard-liners to attempt the coup. Of importance is the fact that this was not a military coup, but rather a conservative coup, in which the military played a role. The military's role was no more important than the role of the KGB, MVD, the military-industrial complex, and the Communist Party bureaucracy. (Realizing, of course, that the distinction between these organizations is often blurred, as they all tend to overlap.) As a group, these various factions combined to try and save the old system, along with the Soviet Union itself. This group has been labeled with a variety of titles: hard-liners; conservatives; right-wing communists; anti-reformers; empire savers, etc. These terms are all synonymous. When used in this paper, the terms are defined as individuals who wanted to conserve the old, pre-perestroika and pre-glasnost system. The GKChP and their supporters wanted to return the Soviet Union to how it was during Brezhnev's regime. During the 1970's the country had become a military superpower. The economy, as well as the people, had been controlled. Law and order was maintained through preventive terror, ensuring that criticism of the regime was made only in private. Public displays of nationalism or dissatisfaction with the

Communist Party were prohibited. Glasnost and perestroika were, in effect, ruining the lives of the members of the GKChP. Through its actions, the GKChP was seeking to protect its corporate self-interest. <sup>4</sup>

With motivation now established, the question turns to why the coup happened when it did. In August 1991, there existed within the Soviet Union the phenomena of multiple power centers. <sup>5</sup> Power was effectively split between the Moscow Center (controlled by the hard-liners) and the various republics. Gorbachev had appeared to vacillate between support for a strong Center and support for the republics. Yet to the hard-liners, they realized that if they did not act quickly, Gorbachev was going to commit himself to the republics by signing the Union Treaty. This treaty signing was to have occurred on 20 August, hence the action of the coup leaders on the 19th. Therefore, the catalyst for the coup, or why the coup attempt happened when it did, was the need to prevent the signing of the Union Treaty. The coup leaders felt that if the Union Treaty was signed, their power base would be significantly reduced.

A chain of events led up to this attempt by the right-wing conservatives to exert their corporate self-interests. These events began with persistent rumors that the military was preparing for a coup in September 1990. The next chapter presents a study of these rumors.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FOUNDATION: THE RUMORED COUP OF SEPTEMBER 1990

Throughout the summer of 1990, the reformers within Gorbachev's government held center stage. The 500 day economic plan was being debated, and its implementation seemed imminent. Discussions had begun on the future shape and government of the USSR; (though it was not yet publicly known as the Union Treaty, these discussions were the beginnings of the treaty.) Independence for the Baltic republics was being debated. The crux did not seem to be the reforms themselves, but rather the speed of their implementation.

Yet on the horizon of Soviet politics, storm clouds were massing. The hard-line conservatives had been dealt blow after blow, to the point that they began to organize themselves to re-exert their influence on Gorbachev. This is not to say that an organized plan or time-line was drawn up for the conservatives to follow--what is intended here is the assessment that the hard-liners were experiencing too many changes and set-backs too quickly. The conservatives began to take action in an effort to slow down, if not halt, these changes and reforms.



The affronts to the conservative way of life were varied and broad ranging. One area of concern was the so-called "loss" of Eastern Europe. Another concern was the growing lack of respect for the military, caused by public criticism and the revelations of previously closed subjects. 6 The military was also being split internally into various factions. Some factions called for reform that would result in a small, professional army. Others sought depoliticalization of the Army. A belief existed on the part of some others that the military needed to replace the Communist Party as the new elite within the Soviet Union. 7

There was also a perception of a general lack of law and order within the country. This was manifested by strikes, ethnic violence, widespread black market activities, and other crimes.

All of these items were offensive to the conservatives. Especially critical to the hard-liners was the economic path that Gorbachev and the reformers were taking. Any step taken towards a market economy hurt the essence of the conservative power base, because the hard-liners gained their power from controlling the economy. The military-industrial complex was the most threatened by any move towards market-oriented reforms. Nikolai Petrakov was one of Gorbachev's economic advisers during the summer of

1990. Petrakov summarized the right-wing resistance to the market reforms as follows.

The military-industrial complex is in no way adapted to the market. It doesn't know how to work in market conditions...Petrakov puts the moment of the [conservative] backlash as the first days of September. It involved the leaders of the defense industry, the army, and the "red landowners"--the chairmen of the state farms.

He believes they were galvanized by the re-emergence of Boris Yeltsin on the political stage, and Mr Gorbachev's decision to work with him on economic reform. The two had agreed to set up the 13-man Shatalin group and told it to draw up a concept for transition to a market economy. By the end of August, the plan was done--and the conservatives were horrified.

The plan was openly dedicated to private property. It would encourage the break-up of the huge state farms. And it would impose a draconian credit squeeze on the loss-making giants of industry, threatening most with bankruptcy. ☐

As September 1990 started, the conservatives began exerting pressure on Gorbachev to abandon the economic reform. A key tool that was used by the right-wing was the sudden appearance of large numbers of combat soldiers in and around Moscow. No prior notice had been given for these troop movements. Throughout the summer of 1990, rumors of a military coup had been reported by the media. There was now apparently substance to the rumors.

All summer, anytime a newspaper article appeared that mentioned coup possibilities, it had been vehemently denied by military authorities. Significantly, many of these denials during the summer had come from known right-wing,

conservative officers. One denial came from the former Warsaw Pact Commander-in-Chief, Marshall Viktor Kulikov.<sup>9</sup> Repeated denials came from a Hero of the Soviet Union, General Boris Gromov.<sup>10</sup> However, the media and the public were not convinced. In September, an American correspondent felt that suspicions were growing, especially in Moscow.

The Soviet Union, in almost 73 years of civil wars and purges and Kremlin intrigues, has not experienced a military coup.

But now, when the country is living through an unprecedented period of confusion, protest and hard times, the fears of a coup are real. Since President Gorbachev began his drive for economic and political reform, Moscow has been--if a city can be said to have a personality--a kind of manic-depressive, swinging between euphoric hopes of change and terrifying fears of reversal. In the past year, as the economy has plunged, the periods of euphoria have been rare, the rumors of catastrophe more common.<sup>11</sup>

The troop movements of September 1990 have never been completely understood or explained. By utilizing a variety of sources, the following events appeared to have occurred.

9 September: The Ryazan Airborne Division was put on alert. Leaves were cancelled. Special 24 hour operations centers were established. Troops began arriving in Moscow, which is approximately 125 miles from Ryazan.

10 September: Pskov Airborne Division, which had recently been deployed in strife torn Kirghizia, landed two

regiments in full combat gear at the Ryazan airfield. Meanwhile, the Ryazan Airborne Division began a roadmarch towards Moscow at 3 A.M. At approximately the same time, the elite Dzershinsky Division of the MVD was put on alert. This unit is made up exclusively of Slavic soldiers. <sup>12</sup>

12 September: Moscow Literaturnaya Gazeta, a liberal newspaper, printed a lengthy article suggesting that the High Command might be seriously considering a coup in an effort to restore order in the country.

13 September: Moscow News, another liberal newspaper, published an article in which a leader of the unofficial military trade union known as Shchit (Shield), stated that he had evidence that "the military leadership already has a clear plan to take control of the situation in the country." <sup>13</sup> The article specifically mentioned Gromov as one of the likely coup leaders. <sup>14</sup>

Also on 13 September, the Commander of the Airborne Forces, Colonel General V. Achalov, responded to questions by a USSR Supreme Soviet Deputy, and stated that the Ryazan Airborne Division was moved to Moscow in preparation for the 7 November parade. Achalov also stated that the Pskov Airborne Division had been airlifted into the Ryazan airfield so that the division would be able to assist with



the potato harvest. The Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Anatoly Lukyanov, publicly agreed with Achalov's statements.

19 September: As tensions and rumors over the troop movements grew, Defense Minister Yazov addressed the Supreme Soviet. Yazov confirmed that the movements had taken place, while he stressed the same points as Colonel General Achalov--the movements were required for parade preparations and the potato harvest. Yazov's remarks were broadcast on national television.

21 September: Moscow News published an open letter that stated a military coup was possible. One of the signers of the letter, Colonel Vilen Martirosyan, a leader in the military reform movement and a USSR Congress of People's Deputy, said that "the army might be used for a purpose for which it is not intended, and this could lead to a seizure of power by the top military command." 13

24 September: A Supreme Soviet deputy stated that he had received information that the airborne divisions were armed with tear gas, weapons, and bullet-proof vests, and that these divisions had been placed under the control of the KGB. The head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, denied this and again repeated the parade preparation story.

25 September: A key day in terms of the information about the rumors and coup speculation. Colonel Sergey Kudinov, the former deputy commander of the Ryazan Military Academy, spoke to the Russian Federation Parliament about the troop movements. Kudinov was fired from his position on 15 September for publishing a report on "the deteriorating situation in the Soviet Army." <sup>16</sup> On 28 September, the deputy chairman of Shchit revealed that Kudinov had been a clandestine member of the organization for three years, but that the organization was forced to reveal his membership so that he could make his comments about the troop movement. <sup>17</sup> Kudinov supplied an apparently eye-witness account of the movement of troops from Ryazan to Moscow. Kudinov stated that the men had been "specially trained" and "ready for battle." Kudinov also remarked that four Army divisions had been moved to Moscow since 9 September. <sup>18</sup>

Kudinov's remarks were printed in Komsomolskaya Pravda on 26 September. The article stated that, in Kudinov's opinion, the Ryazan forces were put on alert due to information that the KGB had obtained. This information allegedly revealed that the democratic, reform oriented forces of the Russian government were planning an armed seizure of important points around Moscow. <sup>19</sup> This is the first indication that can be found that suggests a left-wing, reformer coup was being planned. The

Komsomolskaya Pravda article also commented that the airborne troops that were deployed were issued ammunition, and that they left their garrison quickly and well ahead of schedule by leaving on the 10th. According to Kudinov, the division was scheduled to march in the November parade, but the unit had not planned to leave for Moscow until 22 September. 20

26 September. Defense Minister Yazov again addressed the Supreme Soviet to refute the statements of Colonel Kudinov that had appeared in Komsomolskaya Pravda. Yazov repeated that the reasons for the movements were harvest and parade related. Yazov agreed that additional forces had been moved to Moscow for the parade, specifically elements of the Tula Assault Division, as well as the Vitebsk Airborne Division. Yazov also stated that the airborne troops had been issued ammunition, because "airborne troops--no matter where they go--always go fully equipped in this country." 21 The ammunition was then stored with other units in Moscow while the soldiers prepared for the parade. The Defense Minister cited statistics concerning the number of soldiers harvesting potatoes in the Moscow Military District.

An interesting aside came out of Yazov's remarks. He referred to the Vitebsk Airborne Division as belonging to the KGB Border Troops. This public comment was the first

official verification that the KGB had its own combat divisions, which are considered as a strategic reserve to augment their Speznaz and regular Border Troop units. <sup>22</sup>

27 September: Two committees of the USSR Supreme Soviet were ordered to investigate the controversy surrounding the troop movements. <sup>23</sup> A committee was also formed in the RSFSR Supreme Soviet to look into the allegations. <sup>24</sup>

29 September: Yazov told Sovetskaya Rossiya that the coup rumors were "deliberately circulated by left-wing forces in order to enhance their own drive for power." <sup>25</sup> Yazov also claimed that the rumors were an attempt "at taking peoples' minds off of empty shelves and to provide an excuse for expected hardships this winter." <sup>26</sup> These comments by Yazov seemed to compliment reports that appeared in Sovetskaya Rossiya and Pravda on 26 September, and in Krasnaya Zvezda and Pravda on 2 October, in which democratic leaders, such as Leningrad Mayor Anatolii Sobchak and Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov were accused of trying to take advantage of the situation in a bid to seize power for themselves. Specifically, Popov and Sobchak were accused of "deliberately exacerbating food shortages in order to cause the overthrow of the USSR Council of Ministers." <sup>27</sup>



The coup controversy never led to a military confrontation, but it started a definite war of words among the print media in the Soviet Union. The last week of September and the first two weeks of October were marked by repeated efforts by the liberal and conservative press to blame the other's ideological backing for the crisis in the country. Accusations of rumormongering were exchanged; Colonel Kudinov was titled as "ignorant" or "a patriot;" and Yazov's explanations were either supported or vilified. An interview was published with soldiers involved in the "attack" on the potato harvest. On 9 October, Izvestiya published an article critical of all sides in the debate, and called for a consensus to be reached. 26

Just as it appeared that the coup controversy was subsiding, new information stoked the flames. Komsomolskaya Pravda published a letter on page 1 of their 12 October edition from Major Mikhail Pustobayev, who served in a heavy transport aircraft unit. Pustobayev stated that on 9 September his unit was alerted, the aircraft were loaded with combat outfitted airborne troops, and the planes were flown into an airfield located west of Moscow. The airborne soldiers were kept in a state of emergency readiness. On 11 September, the planes with the soldiers aboard flew to a different airport outside of Moscow. Finally, on 13 September, the soldiers were flown to their original

barracks and they disembarked. Pustobayev maintained that "the idea that this might be an exercise never occurred to those flying towards Moscow." 29 Pustobayev stated that exercises were always planned months in advance, and he likened the situation to 12 December 1979, when his unit was alerted to fly troops into Afghanistan. Pustobayev concluded his letter by remarking that "everything that has been said makes it possible to conclude that Minister of Defense Yazov is deliberately refusing to clarify the situation." 30 If the prospect of an Air Force Major openly challenging the Minister of Defense in a letter was not shocking enough, the television program Vzglyad aired an interview with Pustobayev on the evening of the 12th. Pustobayev again challenged Yazov's statements, maintaining that previously, ammunition had been issued to airborne troops only before they took part in activities to restore order, like in Baku, or before involvement in Afghanistan. Pustobayev stated that ammunition was not issued to airborne troops for exercises, and that the movements had nothing to do with parades or the potato harvest. Pustobayev also said that KGB chief Kryuchkov was telling only half-truths, for Kryuchkov must have known about the movement of the Vitebsk Division, since it now belonged to the KGB. 31

Four days after these allegations were published and broadcasted, Pustobayev refuted his original statements.

Pustobayev now maintained that on 14 October, two days after his allegations were broadcast, he was shown irrefutable evidence by his commander that he had been part of an elaborate exercise designed to test the capabilities of the units involved to rapidly participate in no-notice operations. Pustobayev's apology was displayed prominently in the conservative Sovetskaya Rossiya.

I regret what happened. Now that I have studied all the information and documents, I am convinced that these were exercises. I honestly and sincerely tell you this. I was confused, emotions prevailed over reason. I reiterate: normal exercises were being held, and the people whom I confused must know this. 32

The incident with Major Pustobayev only further distorted an already confused situation. The reports presented by the various committees that investigated the coup controversy presented little clarification or hard evidence. The committees' conclusions were that the situation was still somewhat unclear, but that no coup was attempted. The commission pointed out that special exercises that involved airborne soldiers were conducted in a manner that was not consistent with normal exercises, but that they were exercises nonetheless. The committee also added an anti-rumor statement, pointing out that: "...the attention of persons making statements in the mass media must be drawn to the need for irrefutable facts." 33

In summation, the troop movements and coup controversy of September 1990 can be seen in three ways: possibility, provocation, and paranoia. In many ways, the events of September were used to serve many ends on behalf of many masters. The right-wing conservatives were able to flex their military muscle. The conservatives sent a message to the country that the Army was still a viable force that could be used to restore order in the country. The liberals were able to show, however, that an army unit could no longer be viewed as a single entity, but rather as a sum of its parts. By publicizing the actions and statements of Kudinov and Pustobayev, the reformers proved there were members of the military ready to risk their careers in order to speak out against military actions that they felt might be directed against the Soviet people. If the Soviet people were somewhat suspicious going into September, they were definitely feeling apprehensive by the end of October. The people had been presented almost daily accusations of right-wing repressions and left-wing power grabs. High government officials were accused of lies and attempts at a cover-up. Items as mundane as parade preparations and the potato harvest took on great significance.

Whatever the effect that the events of September had on the Soviet people, one must wonder what effect the actions had on the Soviet President. Gorbachev was as much a

spectator in the events as anyone. Gorbachev heard all the accusations and read all the reports just like anyone else, and he had to possess some of the same doubts as the average Soviet man on the street in Moscow. Was a coup really possible? Did the High Command order these maneuvers to show that they still had effective power within the country, regardless of the gains that the reformers thought they had made? A converse argument is that the High Command was losing effective power: perhaps they were as surprised about the maneuvers as anyone? Why, for instance, on 26 September, did Yazov not mention that some exercises had been conducted and that they were finished, rather than sticking to the "Parade and Potato Story?" Whatever the answers were to these questions, Gorbachev obviously had some internal doubts. No one really knows everything that occurred, or better, why the events that did occur happened at all. But Gorbachev had to make decisions and policies with these doubts in mind. Gorbachev had to wonder if the actions had been a show of support for him, or, much more likely, a warning to him. With these doubts in mind, Gorbachev went into a meeting on 13 November 1990 to discuss military reform with 1,000 soldiers who had been elected to various public offices. The Soviet President appeared significantly more concerned about the military and the conservatives than he had been at the beginning of August.



If the actions of September had been a warning, Gorbachev seemed to get the message. Chapter Three will examine how Gorbachev responded to the warnings.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE SWING TO THE RIGHT

Perhaps a good way to review the meeting that Gorbachev had with the soldiers, as well as the subsequent events in November and December 1990, is through the words and actions of two soldiers who attended the meeting. Colonel Viktor Alksnis and Colonel Nikolai Petrushenko are two leaders of the Soyuz group of deputies that has been active in the Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) and the Supreme Soviet. Alksnis and Petrushenko played a key role in the actions of the Soviet Union in the period of time that is being examined in this study. It is important to note, however, that Alksnis and Petrushenko were little more than self-appointed spokesmen for the right-wing. The two colonels received extensive coverage in the media, not just in the Soviet Union, but world-wide. Yet the colonels' actual, personal power base was relatively limited. The Colonels' words were often strong, but the words were usually not as important to listeners as the perceptions and doubts about whom these Colonels were speaking for. Concrete evidence as to whom Alksnis and Petrushenko represented, other than Soyuz, does not publicly exist. In

fact, it is very likely that Alksnis and Petrushenko were only speaking for themselves. <sup>34</sup> But the rhetoric, as well as the actions of Soyuz, were very much in line with the thoughts of many members of the right-wing, including the members of the GKChP.

Soyuz was formed in February 1990. At that time, Deputy Georgiy Komarev addressed the Supreme Soviet, and stated that Soyuz had been formed in response to forces within the Soviet Union that were prepared to "set fire to our common home with the aim of warming their hands at the embers." <sup>35</sup> Komarev said that these destructive forces had to be kept from taking things too far, and he set forth the Soyuz platform:

1. To fight to preserve the federal system and state integrity of the USSR.
2. To resist separatism, nationalism, and chauvinism within the country in any form or expression.
3. To strive towards the free development on a basis of equal rights of all the peoples, nations, nationalities, ethnic groups and of every citizen throughout the territory of the federal state.
4. To promote the acceleration, development and adoption of a package of most important economic laws, ensuring a way out of the social and economic crisis and the dynamic development of the country.
5. To create constructive foundations for substantially improving the quality of the environment and the living conditions of the population throughout the territory of the federal state. <sup>36</sup>

In an interview in March 1990 with the conservative newspaper Sovetskaya Rossiya, Komarev revealed more information as to the empire-saving ideology of Soyuz. Komarev stated that the independence movement of Lithuania, for example, was only representing 30% of the people in the republic. Komarev felt that all of the separatist movements were discriminatory towards the various minorities within the republics, especially Russians who lived outside the RSFSR. Komarev stated that the main thrust of Soyuz was human rights and equality for all people, regardless of nationality, language or religion, or how long they have lived within a certain territory or republic. Komarev also commented that Soyuz would give every assistance to strengthening the Army, KGB, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and that it was his hope that "all who cherish the Fatherland will be with us." 37

From its inception, Soyuz grew in strength and power. The group claimed in February 1990 to have 103 peoples' deputies in their ranks, but within a year that number had risen to more than 700 of the 2,250 deputies, including deputies from all 15 republics and representing 30 nationalities. Opponents of Soyuz acknowledged that the faction had become the largest voting bloc within the CPD. 38

Of the 81 military men who were members of the CPD in November 1990, Alksnis and Petrushenko were by far the most vocal. Alksnis served as an engineer and inspector for the Air Force main staff in the Baltic Military District, and he represented the Yugoslav National Territorial District (Number 294) in the CPD. Petrushenko was a Senior instructor for Propaganda and Agitation within the Political Department of the Army, and he represented the Kazakhstan Territorial District of Leningorsk (Number 662) in the CPD. 39

Alksnis and Petrushenko's names appeared in the Soviet press in February 1990 as founders and spokesmen for Soyuz. The two men made headlines again in April by calling for Presidential rule in Lithuania. But the first big boost to the political careers of Alksnis and Petrushenko came after the meeting with Gorbachev on 13 November. Both Alksnis and Petrushenko were highly critical of Gorbachev at the meeting. Alksnis told reporters after the meeting that Gorbachev had lost the support of the military, and that the meeting was a "dialogue between the deaf and the dumb." 40

What transpired at the meeting was an apparent attempt by Gorbachev to win back the military, especially the hard line faction. Gorbachev seemed to realize that he needed the Army more than the Army needed him. The actions of September might have been intended to let Gorbachev know



that he could be replaced, by force, if necessary. The meeting itself was quite unusual. Gorbachev's speech was repeatedly interrupted due to shouting from the soldiers.

One officer after another got up to voice outrage at nationalist excesses, high desertion rates, draft evasion, poor living conditions, the 'persecution' of Communists, the dismantling of monuments to ...Lenin, and 'one-sided' concessions to the West. <sup>41</sup>

Gorbachev announced that he was prepared to take corrective action on most of the demands. As a sign of Gorbachev's intentions to set things right with the High Command were two important items in his speech concerning reforms and glasnost. Gorbachev summarily rejected the calls for military reform that had been championed by Vladimir Lopatin. Lopatin's plan had called for a smaller, all-professional Army and the creation of territorially based units within the Soviet Union. Gorbachev stated that he had studied Lopatin's proposals and he had "found them wanting." <sup>42</sup> Gorbachev's comments obviously pleased the High Command.

[Gorbachev] also sided with the High Command on the crucial issue of glasnost, urging the media to take a more constructive approach in their portrayal of military affairs and arguing that negative treatment in the media had undermined the army's prestige. His comments again reflected those voiced by the military leadership and reversed a policy that he himself had instigated and encouraged. <sup>43</sup>

However, even if the High Command was pleased with Gorbachev's remarks, the general feeling of the right-wing

appeared to be that Gorbachev had still not gone far enough. Economic reform was still planned, and reformers still held critical positions. This situation was not to last much longer. Gorbachev had moved closer to the right, but he was not yet completely into the hard-line fold. The rhetoric and threats intensified.

" Alksnis and Petrushenko were now used extensively. On 17 November Alksnis addressed the CPD, stating that he was speaking for Soyuz. Alksnis first mentioned that he supported Gorbachev's plan for a federation of republics; then he addressed Gorbachev personally:

Yes, we have had a conflict with you. But I can tell you the following: I personally and my voters and the Army support any of your actions aimed at preserving union and at strengthening our state power, at the salvation of the state. That I promise you and I will assist all this to the maximum. But I want to say that the credit of confidence in you has been exhausted. You have 30 days left. If by the fourth Congress of USSR People's Deputies there is no radical turn-around of the state of affairs, it is obvious that at the fourth Congress the question of you personally will be resolved. I do not want this to sound like a threat to you, but simply that this will be realized. 44

In an interview published a few days later, Alksnis stated that Gorbachev "acts only when it's too late. His decrees remind me of a hurried man who gets to the train platform just in time to get the last train. Even those belated decrees are ignored." 45 Less than a week after Alksnis addressed the Congress, Petrushenko followed him to the

podium to remind Gorbachev that he had 24 days left, and if he had not acted by that time "we shall have to form some kind of national salvation committee." 46

The assumption can be made that these speeches and their stated threats were taken seriously by Gorbachev, because a major turn-around did take place. The first step was taken when Gorbachev abandoned the Shatalin economic plan. The second step was on 23 November, when Gorbachev appeared to try to intimidate independence minded republics at a televised press conference. Two nights later, Defense Minister Dmitrii Yazov used some of the same strong words in speaking out against anti-union forces. Then, on 27 November, Yazov again spoke to a TV audience and announced that the armed forces had been authorized to use force against demonstrators to protect military installations and personnel. 47

A third major step by Gorbachev was the dismissal of Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin on 2 December. Bakatin was replaced by Boris Pugo, the former Latvian KGB chief and Communist Party leader. Named to be Pugo's deputy was General Boris Gromov, the former commander of Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Alksnis was quoted as seeing the removal of Bakatin as a sign that "steps are being taken to carry out Gorbachev's program for stabilizing the situation in the country." 48 Alksnis also commented that Bakatin's

removal was required because Bakatin was "fully responsible for the blood spilt in Moldavia. He was not only passive, but he rendered concrete support to separatist forces in the republics." <sup>47</sup> TASS reported that Soyuz had campaigned for the removal of Bakatin. One Soyuz member had not only predicted Bakatin's removal, but the deputy also stated that "the turn (to resign or be removed) of other people who do not suit Soyuz would come very soon." <sup>50</sup> This prediction came true on 20 December with the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze.

During Shevardnadze's resignation speech, he referred to Alksnis and Petrushenko as the "boys in colonel's epaulets." <sup>51</sup> Shevardnadze then asked a critical question about Alksnis and Petrushenko: "What is surprising, and I think we should think seriously: who is behind these comrades and why is no one rebuffing them?" <sup>52</sup> This was an excellent question that was to remain unanswered.

Two key reformers, Bakatin and Shevardnadze, had been removed from Gorbachev's government. Yet the swing to the right was still not complete. The position of Vice-President had been established in the Soviet Union, and reformers

...had conjured up their profile of a probable Vice-President: a non-Russian to unite the country, a person of popular stature or at least a winning public figure to repair Mr. Gorbachev's diminished prestige, and someone with a reformist reputation. <sup>53</sup>

The reformer's optimistic hopes were crushed when Gorbachev nominated Gennadi Yanaev, the consummate Party bureaucrat, to the position. Yanaev stressed in his nomination speech that the country needed a return to law and order, and that it needed to move away from economic "shock therapy." <sup>54</sup> The Yanaev nomination was at first defeated, and when it passed on the second ballot, fraud allegations were made by reformist groups who had opposed Yanaev. Gorbachev had made a very strong appeal for Yanaev between the first and second ballots, telling the CPD that: "I want someone alongside me that I can trust." <sup>55</sup> Soyuz apparently played a strong role in Yanaev's election. The new Vice-President told TASS that he gave "wholehearted support" to Soyuz. <sup>56</sup>

The final personnel piece that was needed to complete the swing to the right was the appointment of Valentin Pavlov as Prime Minister. Like Yanayev, Pavlov was a career, hard-core communist, who had risen to power through a variety of jobs in the command-economy system, including high level positions in the State Committee of Prices and Gosplan. Pavlov had also served as the Minister of Finance. <sup>57</sup>

The swing to the right by Gorbachev laid the foundation for the August 1991 coup attempt. Of course, the possibility exists that the coup might have been attempted even if Gorbachev had not swung to the right. One can



speculate that the coup attempt might have happened sooner than August, and that Gorbachev's movement away from reform only delayed the attempt. Yet beyond speculation is the fact that Gorbachev's mistake of whom he could trust greatly influenced the August coup.

A key question concerning the personnel changes made in December and January is whether Gorbachev acted of his own accord, or was he forced to make changes. The forced school of thought follows the belief that throughout the Winter of 1990-1991, Gorbachev was no more than a puppet, being controlled by the KGB and the High Command. This argument can be persuasive, but it deteriorates if it is tracked out to 23 April 1991, when Gorbachev announced the agreement that was reached with the majority of the republics concerning the Union Treaty. If Gorbachev was only a puppet, why was he allowed to negotiate the treaty?

The second argument, that Gorbachev changed on his own, is more believable, and the best answer seems to be a combination of the two arguments. This assumes that in November 1990 Gorbachev still wanted economic reform and a Union Treaty, but that he was concerned about holding onto power through the winter. This concern led to Gorbachev's pragmatic swing to the right, but also allowed him to revert back to his reform path in the spring.

In either case, Gorbachev had three days alone in his summer vacation dacha in August 1991 to reflect on his mistakes concerning whom he felt he could trust. The mistakes Gorbachev made in personnel appointments manifested themselves in the form of the GKChP. As of this writing, what was the USSR is collapsing, in large part having been pushed towards collapse by the failure of the GKChP, which is reviewed in the next chapter. The probability is high that Gorbachev's mistake was a key element in the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PROMISE OF FAILURE

For more than 70 years, the people of the Soviet Union were oppressed. Mass terror was a tool used quite effectively by the leaders of the Communist Party. The people were very docile and submissive. The opinions of the citizens were not sought out by leaders, and expressions of nationalism were censured. Whenever elections were conducted, the results were planned and organized well before any actual voting took place. Changes in the leadership of the country were made and the results were then announced to the people. There was no input from below; everything was fed down from the top.

Various institutions within the Soviet Union helped contribute to the repression. The Armed Forces, the KGB, and the media all played enormous roles in suppressing the people. Independent thoughts and ideas were discouraged; independent actions were outlawed. Preventive terror was the law of the land. Collectivization, purges, show trials, the Gulag--these were but a few of the items in the litany of terror and repression that was the Soviet Union. Many believe that this submissiveness on the part of the people pre-dates the beginnings of the Soviet Union.

Writers and historians have believed for centuries that the Russians are uniquely ill-disposed to freedom. "All the people consider themselves to be slaves of their prince," wrote a 16th-century German traveler to Russia. That assessment would endure. Alexander Pushkin deemed his countrymen obedient "sheep." In Dostoevsky's The Brother's Karamazov, the Grand Inquisitor tells Christ that "in the end, the people will lay their freedom at our feet and say: 'Make us your slaves, but feed us.'" 50

The Soviet Union was a diverse empire that covered large land areas on two continents. The country had a population of nearly 300 million people, belonging to approximately 85 ethnic groups. The people were united in only one regard: fear. Fear held the Soviet Union together. Fear kept nationalistic feelings in check. Fear insured that the people stayed docile and subservient. But over the last 5 years, there were major changes. Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms changed the institutions that repressed the people. These changes gave the people freedom and removed their fears and their historic feelings of submission. The removal of fear did not happen all at once, and it was not removed from all the people. Yet fear has been removed in sufficient enough quantities to change world affairs. A lack of fear defeated the coup of August 1991.

In some regards, the fear did not leave the Soviet Union, but instead, the fear shifted. As the people lost their fear, the self-appointed leaders began to experience it. The Committee for the State of Emergency (GKChP) was a small group of men who were afraid. The GKChP had watched

Gorbachev's reforms lead to the removal of the preventive terror that had kept the people submissive. The hard-line conservatives had resisted Gorbachev's reforms; they tried to undermine and sabotage the changes in many areas. However, in spite of the conservatives' efforts, the empire that the Communist Party controlled was in danger of crumbling into segments of nationalism. A Union Treaty that would have formally shifted power away from the Center to the republics was to be signed on 20 August. This caused the GKChP to act when it did. The GKChP acted in an attempt to go back in time to when fear ruled the country and nationalism was repressed. But the actions of the GKChP came to late.

There are already numerous interpretations as to why the coup failed. Some are fairly simplistic. For instance, one theory holds that the coup failed because the eight members of the GKChP appeared to be drunk the entire time. Although this may well be true, it is not, in itself, a cause that insured the failure of the coup. The drinking was probably only a symptom of deeper causes of the coup's failure.

Others have argued that the coup failed due to the faulty tactics employed by the coup leaders. This theory points out that the coup was begun on a Monday; a better time would have been on a Saturday. The followers of the



tactical failure theory also point out that Boris Yeltsin should have been arrested or killed, and that communication networks were not seized in a timely manner, or at all. The main problem with this theory is it leads one to think that, had the GKChP acted differently, the coup might have been successful. This, however, is most improbable. The coup failed because enough of the people refused to be pushed back in time. Had the coup occurred four years earlier, it quite possibly would have succeeded. Yet the coup was probably condemned to fail as early as the summer of 1989, as the policies of glasnost and perestroika began to irrevocably change the social structure of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The GKChP either misunderstood or underestimated these changes.

The rise in nationalism within the Soviet Union helped both to cause the coup and insure its failure. The desire to save the Soviet Empire was a key motive for the GKChP. Yet this form of Soviet nationalism was adequately countered, especially within the Baltics and the RSFSR, by a nationalistic fervor that the eight-man committee was ill-equipped to defeat. The coup was the last act of desperate men who likely knew that their effort would be in vain, for the destiny of the coup was failure.

This chapter will focus on four key elements of the failure of the coup. These elements are the GKChP itself,

the media, the Soviet Armed Forces, and the people. As these elements are discussed, attention will also be paid to interactions between events in the Soviet Union and outside influences, especially the influence of Western countries. A brief review of the linkage of Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign and domestic reforms is therefore warranted.

#### THE LINKAGE OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC REFORMS

In February 1990, an ultra-conservative unofficial Soviet newspaper, Svobodnoye Slovo, published a cartoon of Gorbachev. In the cartoon, Gorbachev is doing a strip-tease for Uncle Sam. On the ground around Gorbachev lie various articles of clothing that have already been removed. Each article has a label: "Hungary," "Poland," "GDR," etc. Also around Gorbachev's feet lie the missiles that the Soviet Union gave up in the INF Treaty. The cartoon also shows Gorbachev removing another piece of clothing which is labeled "Romania." An appreciative Uncle Sam is throwing dollar bills at Gorbachev as he removes the piece of clothing. 57 The cartoon seems to summarize how many conservatives felt towards Gorbachev's foreign policy. In many instances, Gorbachev appeared quite willing to trade land or military equipment for Western currency.

This trade-off of land and equipment for aid was not what Gorbachev had intended when he became leader of the

Soviet Union. In Perestroika, Gorbachev alludes to just the opposite. He criticizes the West for historically using detente in an effort to destabilize the Soviet Union and its allies whenever the Soviet economy seemed to stagnate. <sup>40</sup> Gorbachev believed that by strengthening the Socialist system, he could use strength to reduce confrontation. This would allow for a move "towards peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation." <sup>41</sup> Gorbachev clearly saw the interaction that was needed between his foreign policy and his domestic reforms.

In terms of foreign relations, Gorbachev discerned the requirement for a policy that would stabilize the international environment. By making relations between the Soviet Union and the West more predictable, Gorbachev could then concentrate on his domestic reforms. <sup>42</sup> The need to restructure the Soviet economy was Gorbachev's biggest challenge, and improving relations with the West was a means of receiving Western investment and technology. In line with the restructuring of the economy, domestic reforms were needed. Glasnost was implemented as a means to energize the nation by having the Soviet media and the people report on inefficiency within the economic system. <sup>43</sup> Glasnost was not intended to become an impetus for nationalistic expressions, nor was it envisioned to be a Western-style freedom of the press. Yet it was perceived as such by many

in the West. Of course, any changes in Soviet domestic policy that improved its appearance to the West was welcomed by Gorbachev. The release of Andrei Sakharov from internal exile in December 1986 is an example of this linkage, for it was seen throughout the West as evidence of Gorbachev's willingness to improve respect for human rights within the USSR. And while Sakharov's release was a sign of improvement, an indication to the West was probably not Gorbachev's primary intention. In reality, Gorbachev invited Sakharov out of exile as a sign to the Soviet intelligentsia that domestically, Gorbachev needed their assistance to restructure the economy. 44

Gorbachev's reforms led to an avalanche of historically significant events: the INF Treaty, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, the reunification of Germany, and the CFE Treaty. Within the USSR, reforms were also yielding results at a breathtaking pace. The communist ideology was dying, and in its place were nationalistic fervor and proclamations of independence by the republics. Ethnic unrest was growing, and Gorbachev was perceived as losing control. The hard-line conservative communists especially viewed Gorbachev in this manner. The conservatives saw the years 1985-1990 as a downward spiral. As each change was made, the conservatives lost more power and more influence. The conservatives began to sense growing disorder within the

country, and a loss of security outside the country. The conservatives believed, although Gorbachev's policy of "New Thinking" was bringing in millions of dollars and Deutsche marks in aid, the money was not enough to offset the vulnerability that the Soviet Union now faced. This vulnerability was viewed from a perception that a united Germany, which many conservatives had argued against, could be a threat. <sup>45</sup> The conservatives also strongly criticized Gorbachev's foreign policy for allowing the Warsaw Pact to dissolve while NATO remained intact, and for making what they felt were one-sided concessions in the treaties that had been negotiated. Some also attacked Gorbachev for his position on the US-led coalition in Saudi Arabia, calling Gorbachev's actions "appeasement." <sup>46</sup>

This perceived downward spiral culminated with the August 1991 coup attempt. The conservatives had the impression that Gorbachev had led the country from superpower status to that of a beggar nation. The GKChP felt that if Gorbachev was allowed to continue, and the union treaty was signed, then all would be lost. The need for the GKChP to save the empire had been brought on in no small part by the linkage between Gorbachev's domestic and foreign policies. Since the coup, former Defense Minister Yazov has stated that the GKChP also acted out of fear that Gorbachev was making the Soviet Union "dependent on the

United States," not just economically, but also politically and militarily. <sup>67</sup> Unfortunately for the eight members of the GKChP, they did not realize that who they were and what they represented was to be a leading cause for the failure of the coup.

#### THE GKChP

The hard-line, conservative communists began their efforts to consolidate their powers and stop Gorbachev's reforms during the Fall of 1990. Personnel changes were made within the Soviet government, the most important of which was the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze in December 1990. Shevardnadze had come under intense criticism by the right wing for his conduct of Soviet foreign policy. <sup>68</sup> The main complaint against Shevardnadze was that he had lost Eastern Europe, resulting in the need for the Soviet military to conduct "a disorderly, almost humiliating retreat." <sup>69</sup> Conservatives called for criminal investigations of Shevardnadze's conduct as foreign minister. This led some to speculate that a charge of treason against Shevardnadze could be used to discredit all foreign policies made under him, thereby delaying troop withdrawals and the ratification of treaties. <sup>70</sup> In his resignation speech, Shevardnadze had warned that a dictatorship was coming. <sup>71</sup> This prophecy seemed to be



coming true when the Soviet military began a crackdown in the Baltics in January 1991. National Salvation Committees appeared ready to take over power in the rebellious republics, as well as in the RSFSR. <sup>72</sup> Yet the crackdown was quickly terminated amidst much confusion and denial of responsibility.

In retrospect, the bungling of the January crackdown was just a preview of the misadventures of the GKChP in August. On paper, the right wing appeared to have the power necessary in January to forcibly bring change and re-establish law and order in the Baltics, and from there spread authoritarian rule throughout the Soviet Union. Yet the conservatives did not follow through with their use of force. One factor for the hesitation might have been concern over the reaction of the US and other Western nations, but this is improbable. The thought that the US or NATO would have responded militarily to assist the Baltics is not within the realm of possibility. Diplomatically, the US had its attention devoted to the events unfolding in the Middle East. Had the crackdown continued, relations between the Soviet Union and the West would have suffered, and Western aid would have been withheld, but that is not enough of a threat to be the primary motivation for the hard-liners stopping the actions. <sup>73</sup> A better explanation for the termination of activities in the Baltics is that the

crackdown appeared to be doomed by a lack of a clear plan or organization, and the absence of a leader for the hard-line communists to unite around.

The right wing conservatives seemed crippled by indecision. Especially frustrating to the conservatives was the Gorbachev riddle: whose side was he really on? Gorbachev was like a pendulum, swinging from the left to the right, from reform to hard-line. The available evidence seems to suggest that Gorbachev supported the initial actions in the Baltics, but then refused to allow them to continue, and the conservatives were not yet willing to take actions into their own hands. 74

By August, however, the conservatives felt they had waited on Gorbachev long enough. Yet their attempt to remove Gorbachev was doomed to fail. The eight members of the GKChP had nothing to offer the diverse peoples of the Soviet Union, not even the Russians. The GKChP did not have a plan of action; theirs was a plan of inaction. The goal of the GKChP was to gain control of the country and to stop the reforms, yet they offered no plan to replace the reforms. The plan to gain control might have been able to put food into the stores in the short-run, but in the long-run the GKChP was offering the same broken system that over the last 70 years had nearly bankrupted the USSR. The members of the GKChP were tainted by the Communist Party.

The GKChP was made-up of the same old faces that totally lacked any charisma. Reformers like Boris Yeltsin may not have had a clear plan for recovery to present to the people on 19 August 1991, but he at least offered a promise of change.

Perhaps the GKChP thought, since Gorbachev was held in such low esteem throughout the country, removing him from power would be a means of gaining support from the people. If this was part of the GKChP's thought-process, they badly miscalculated. In the extremely diverse country that was the Soviet Union, practically the only way to unite all the various ethnic factions in 1991 was a threat to return the country to the authoritarian days of the past. The people had tasted freedom, and they refused to return to a totalitarian system, thereby resisting their historical tendency to submissiveness.

The GKChP was also condemned to fail due to a lack of ruthlessness. No one on the committee seemed ready to order the violence against the civilian population that would have been necessary for them to hold power. <sup>25</sup> Yet even if the area around the Russian White House had been turned into a Soviet version of Tiananmen Square, it is improbable that this would have been enough for the GKChP to quash resistance and to gain success. To overcome the opposition to it, the GKChP would have needed to conduct dozens of

massacres across the country. The coup was not just opposed in Moscow, Leningrad, and the Baltics, but across the entire Soviet Union. An attempt at a total crackdown would have proved to be impossible. If a group of protesters had been arrested or killed, it seems likely that another group would have appeared to protest the arrest or killings of the first group. In the end, this attempt to regain law and order would most likely have resulted in an uncontrollable spiral of disorder and chaos, and splits between the Army, KGB, and MVD.

Another significant cause for the failure of the GKChP to stay in power for more than three days was its dealings with the media. The fear that had pushed the GKChP into action was evident to all of the USSR and around the world on the evening of 19 August, the first day of the coup. In what might have been one of the largest tactical blunders made by the GKChP, a press conference was held with five of the eight members of the GKChP. One has to wonder what the GKChP hoped to accomplish by staging a media event in front of many of the reporters whose publications had been "temporarily banned" that same morning. <sup>76</sup> When Nikita Khrushchev was ousted in 1964, the move was announced, and no one tried to explain it. More recently, when martial law was declared in Poland at the end of 1981, the emergency committee imposed a ban on all press activities. This news

blackout lasted for three days. 77 Yet the GKChP felt the need to stage a media event, and this leads to an examination of a second key element in the failure of the coup.

## THE MEDIA

The following citation was the lead for a commentary printed in Izvestiya the day after the coup's collapse:

It is 1800 on 19 August; the GKChP presentation at the...Press Center has just ended; it had been repeatedly interrupted by outbursts of contemptuous laughter: The people sitting behind the table on the platform were no longer invoking fear--they were loathsome and pathetic; it is not accidental that now the television just loves showing the panorama of these faces.

Exiting from the room, Otto Latsis told me: "I am afraid to admit it, but I seem to be feeling something akin to cautious optimism. Such people are doomed."

I checked it later: Quite a few people sensed the same. The junta was doomed as soon as it showed itself to the people. How could these people with shaking hands, trembling lips, and shifty eyes lay claim to power over the great country? 78

This is an excellent summation of how the GKChP was viewed after the press conference. How could the committee of salvation possibly save an empire when it could not even control a press conference? An examination of the transcript of the conference reveals that 21 people asked questions. 79 Eight questions were asked by foreign journalists, and at least two questions were asked by

reporters whose newspapers had been banned that very morning. Thirteen of the 21 questioners can be interpreted as being openly hostile towards the GKChP and its actions. For example, some demanded information about Gorbachev, or others asked about the constitutionality of the GKChP's decrees. One journalist asked if the GKChP had called General Pinochet for advice. <sup>80</sup>

An especially significant question was asked by a reporter from Pravda, one of the newspapers not banned by the GKChP that morning. The question started out to be a general inquiry on how the GKChP was going to fix the economy. But then the reporter skillfully added a political statement into a second question. Rather than just asking the GKChP what they thought about the resistance to them being organized by Boris Yeltsin, the reporter repeated parts of Yeltsin's statement. Yeltsin was quoted by the reporter as calling the events a "right wing, reactionary, anti-constitutional coup," and the reporter also mentioned that Yeltsin was calling for a "general, indefinite strike." <sup>81</sup> The GKChP had been trying all day to suppress any information on Yeltsin's activities, and here, at their own press conference, one of the reporters from a newspaper the GKChP thought it could trust told a nationwide audience about Yeltsin's statements. Later that evening, the Vremya newscast, which had been given strong orders to support the



junta, briefly carried a report on Yeltsin's appeal to the people. This was much to the chagrin of the GKChP, which thought it had taken enough steps to insure censorship of the television program. <sup>82</sup> The GKChP did an even sloppier job of censorship outside of Moscow: in Leningrad, the television station and the print media were never affected, and they continued to broadcast and print anti-GKChP items throughout the coup. <sup>83</sup>

Other contributors to the failure of the GKChP were the copying machine and the fax. After the coup, Eduard Shevardnadze said: "Freedom of information is an inalienable aspect of freedom and democracy. Praised be information technology." <sup>84</sup> This use of technology was significant. Mimeographed sheets of all of Yeltsin's decrees were handed out around Moscow. Letters of support from agencies ranging from a group of naval officers to labor union leaders were faxed to the Russian White House, and then copied and distributed. An emergency phone directory was published and circulated around Yeltsin's headquarters. This directory listed one number for "first hand information from the streets." <sup>85</sup> A short-wave radio station was also established at the White House, and its frequency was passed by word of mouth.

Special editions of banned newspapers were produced on word processors and typewriters, then xeroxed and

distributed. Some copies were posted on walls in subway stations. <sup>86</sup> The banned newspaper Rossiia, which is the organ of the Presidium of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet, ran the following message on the bottom of each page of its special editions: "Read and pass onto someone else--If you can, make copies!" <sup>87</sup>

Foreign journalists also played a role in the defeat of the coup. The GKChP made no known attempt to expel or silence foreign reporters, probably in an effort to avoid confrontation with Western countries. Western radio and television stations increased their news broadcasts into the Soviet Union. Gorbachev, like many others, received information via radio from the BBC, Radio Liberty, and Voice of America. <sup>88</sup> The BBC even gave up some of its frequencies to the banned Radio Rossii. <sup>89</sup> And to again quote Shevardnadze:

"Praised be CNN. Anyone who owned a parabolic antenna able to receive this network's transmissions had a complete picture of what was happening. Meanwhile [official Soviet] television emitted murky waves of lies and disinformation. <sup>90</sup>

## THE ARMED FORCES

The actions of the Soviet armed forces (for purposes of this study, armed forces includes the military and the troops assigned to the KGB and the MVD) during the coup had some historical precedent. Throughout its history, the

Russian army never has taken power for itself, but it has influenced numerous leadership changes. This has been accomplished by either giving support to one faction, or by withholding support, leading to the downfall of an individual or group. This is what occurred in August. The armed forces practiced their historical tendency. A few military units supported the GKChP, and a few more units appeared to have resisted the coup attempt. The majority of the armed forces seemed to wait on the sidelines, not supporting either side.

Much has already been written about the split within the Soviet military: the higher ranking officers were generally conservative communists, while the younger officers and soldiers, if they have any political feelings at all, are predominately reform-oriented. The tradition for the Russian military is to find someone to throw its support behind; to find a political ally. The results of August are inconclusive. The military certainly did not support the GKChP in large enough numbers for the committee to have been successful. But it would be incorrect to unequivocally state that the majority of the military gave its support to Boris Yeltsin. The point to be made is that the military is still searching for a political ally. This ally might in fact turn out to be Yeltsin, but that is not a definite conclusion at this time. The military is still

waiting, like most people, to see the future direction of the former Soviet Union.

The last six years have brought tremendous change to the Soviet armed forces. Glasnost has especially hurt the military's senior leadership: it exposed the loss of the war in Afghanistan; caused a decline in the military's prestige; and led to budget reductions, civilian interference, and the discharge of a large number of officers. <sup>71</sup> This discharge of officers, required by the reductions that Gorbachev ordered in 1988, has been estimated by former Defense Minister Yazov as numbering 100,000 officers, including 35,000 who had not served long enough to be entitled to pensions. <sup>72</sup>

Of even greater concern to many within the armed forces has been a perception that Soviet national security was diminished by Gorbachev. The KGB and MVD lost much of their ability to control internal security as they were barred from practicing preventive terror. As reforms led to reductions of intrusive interference, the country moved away from its authoritarian past. The external threat to the Soviet Union was also perceived by some as being a grave danger. Conservative critics maintained that a strong military policy had kept the USSR free from attack for over 45 years, but now Gorbachev's foreign policies have threatened the security of the Soviet Union. Much of this

was mentioned above, but a few examples will further amplify the military feelings of vulnerability.

Colonel Viktor Alksnis of the conservative group Soyuz was quoted in July 1991 as stating:

The threat to the Soviet Union has increased. I support our leaving Eastern Europe--but only if the United States also leaves Western Europe. If we leave Cam Ranh Bay (in Vietnam), the US should leave the Philippines.

We dissolved the Warsaw Pact, but the West did not dissolve NATO. Instead, the military forces of the US are still in the Persian Gulf region--they are still there, in spite of promises to withdraw. From the north of Iraq to the Soviet border is only a very short distance. "3

Another example is an article written about Colonel General Boris Gromov, the former commander of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and the former deputy minister of the MVD.

One of the most strongly worded manifestations [of opposition to Gorbachev's foreign policy] was an article by [Gromov, published in early 1990]. He charged that the United States, unlike the USSR, was "not hurrying to reduce its armed forces, or to withdraw its troops from the territories of other countries." The military doctrines of NATO and the US continued to be aggressive, he added, concluding not only that the US continued to seek "strategic superiority" over the USSR, but that "the forces of reaction have not abandoned their efforts to destabilize conditions in the world, especially in Socialist countries." "4

Former Defense Minister Yazov grew increasingly vocal in his criticism of "New Thinking" in the months leading up to the coup. In early March 1991, Yazov attacked the CFE agreement, stating that "Moscow had made too many

concessions in negotiating it." 73 At the All-Army Party Conference in late March, Yazov made the keynote address.

[Yazov] went on to address claims that the Soviet Union no longer faced a military threat from the West. Such claims, he contended, "are nothing more than the speculation of politicians trying to satisfy their personal ambitions at any price--even by destroying the country's defense system." Taking aim at a cornerstone of the new political thinking--the idea that war has ceased to be an extension of politics--Yazov said that the Gulf war demonstrated that military force continues to be a means of settling international disputes. He also railed against efforts by the West to obtain what he called one-sided advantages in the military sphere, to destroy strategic parity, and to establish a "new order" in the world by strong-arm tactics. 74

Yazov was followed to the podium by Colonel General Nikolai Shlyaga, the head of the Army and Navy Main Political Administration, who stated that the "process of detente is still not irreversible." 75

Yet all of these conservative outcries stand out as old-fashioned, communist rhetoric. The Soviet High Command needed an external enemy to maintain its large size, its prestige, its budget, and its privileges. As the officially sponsored perception of threat from traditional Western enemies diminished, the military's role has begun to change to that of an internal police force, which is a duty that the military does not welcome. 76 What is left to the Soviet armed forces, according to an American journalist, is the realization that they have:



No credible enemy. No animating ideology. No unifying sense of nationhood. No appetite for foreign adventurism or domestic riot control. The Soviet Military, more than 4 million strong, is awash in its own irrelevance. 99

The actions of the GKChP in August were in part an attempt to regain relevance for the Soviet armed forces. Had the GKChP been successful, a return to the Cold War would not have been improbable. Yet the GKChP was not able to immediately offer the armed forces anything that the soldiers could rally around, and this cost the committee the support of the military. The GKChP was not able to offer a "smoking gun" or a tangible enemy to the army. As tanks rolled through the streets of Moscow, the only enemy was the people, the only targets were crowds, buses, and barricades that had been erected under the orders of the one man who had political legitimacy. In comparison to the GKChP, Yeltsin was the only person who had a legal basis to be issuing orders. Yeltsin had been democratically elected, with many in the military voting for him. 100

Yeltsin had worked hard to win the favor of the military during his election campaign. This was not easy for Yeltsin, for he carried a reputation as being anti-military. This reputation was at least partially earned by Yeltsin in 1987. Shortly after the landing of a small airplane in Red Square by Mathias Rust, Yeltsin

rebuked the officers of the Moscow Military District in Krasnaya Zvezda, the daily newspaper of the armed forces.

Yeltsin's attack extended far beyond the failure to intercept Rust's aircraft. "Rudeness, boorishness, and intimidation," Yeltsin said, were widespread in the officer corps and had given rise to "toadies, bootlickers, sycophants, and window dressers." He went on to say, "An atmosphere of smugness, boasting, and complacency has emerged everywhere. This atmosphere deprives active people of initiative and the ability to assert a correct viewpoint" and encourages "a style that blunts the cutting edge of the idea of the motherland's security." 101

A key to Yeltsin's appeal to the military during the election was his selection of Alexander Rutskoi to be his vice-president. Rutskoi had earned a "Hero of the Soviet Union" in Afghanistan, and was well respected in the military. Rutskoi had been very critical of the military crackdown in the Baltics in January 1991, especially concerning Gorbachev's evading responsibility for the deaths by blaming the local army commander. 102

Yeltsin also campaigned heavily at military posts across the RSFSR. One of Yeltsin's major campaign speeches was delivered at an Army barracks in Tula, where an elite Airborne Division was stationed. Yeltsin evidently made a great impression on the soldiers stationed there, promising to build them an extra 500 apartments, as well as offering them a share in the royalties from his autobiography. 103 Yeltsin's selection of this unit seems especially fortunate, for during the coup, this airborne unit was among the first that was ordered by the GKChP to surround the Russian White House. The orders were refused.

As the coup progressed, Yeltsin took his appeals directly to the soldiers and officers. On the second night of the coup, Yeltsin recorded an appeal that was rebroadcast whenever possible.

I appeal to you, soldiers and officers of Russia. Do not let yourself be turned into blind weapons to defend privileges. In this difficult hour, distinguish real truth from lies. Do not dishonor Russia by shedding the blood of your own people. The days of the plotters are numbered. Law and constitutional order will be victorious. Russia will be free. 104

Around Moscow, flyers were made available for citizens to hand to the soldiers. The flyers read:

SOLDIERS! OFFICERS! Fulfill your obligation before the law and the Fatherland. Support Russian President Yeltsin and your elected People's Deputies. Tanks under the command of Major Yevdokeemov are positioned to defend the Russian Parliament Building. Follow the example of Major Yevdokeemov and his soldiers. 105

Appeals like this presented the soldiers with two options: obey the GKChP, or obey Yeltsin. The first option meant following the orders of Communist Party bureaucrats. These bureaucrats had little power, and what power they did have was of a questionable legal and constitutional basis. The end result of the first option would more than likely require the soldiers to fire on unarmed civilians, some of whom might have been relatives.

The second option allowed the soldiers to follow the orders of a democratically elected leader, who seemed to be speaking from a firm legal basis. The second option would

presumably avoid violence against civilians, for units could actively support Yeltsin or remain neutral. If a unit rejected the first option, there appears to have been little pressure to follow the orders of the GKChP. For instance, when the KGB's elite Alpha Unit refused to attack the Russian Parliament Building, no disciplinary action was taken against them. A court-martial was threatened, but there was no follow-up. <sup>106</sup> The armed forces had no reason to fear the GKChP. Although some units followed the orders of the GKChP, enough units refused to help ensure the committee's failure. Yet one must be careful to not assume that when a military unit refused to support the GKChP, the unit gave de facto support to Yeltsin. This was not the case. Future attempts to control the deteriorating situation in the republics might be led by an individual or group that gains the support of significant segments of the armed forces.

## THE PEOPLE

The final element that led to the defeat of the coup was the people. Some citizens appeared to support the coup, while many others seemed apathetic. Yet enough people decided to take a largely symbolic stand against the GKChP to cause its downfall. The social resistance to the coup was not just in Moscow, Leningrad and the Baltics, but

throughout the USSR. As the coup progressed, the social rebellion grew in size and scale. General strikes were announced throughout the country. The people did not seem to fear the GKChP. As time went on, and concern about a military attack lessened, the resistance by the people grew even stronger. In one important respect, there appeared to have been a role reversal within the Soviet Union during the coup. For 70 years, the leaders possessed clear power, and all the society had was fear. Yet as the coup progressed, the power seemed to be with the mobs in the streets, and the fear seemed to rest with the GKChP.

This shift in fear had been coming about for quite some time--the coup was only the latest manifestation of the phenomenon. The first step to the reversal of fear had been a combination of the moral collapse of the people, coupled with the death of the "Lie of Communism." <sup>107</sup> The moral collapse was summed up with a feeling of despair by the people, brought on by the realization that everything was broken. As the lie died,

...not only were the long decades of Stalin and Brezhnev swept away, but the very foundations of Sovietism, the economic theories of Marx and the political practices of Lenin, were touched. By 1988 Marxism-Leninism was a shambles; and by 1989 it could be openly denounced by leading intellectuals...as a dead weight on the mind of the nation. <sup>108</sup>

And as the lie died, the fear began to shift.

Strikes and demonstrations throughout the country, especially after 1988, served as another watershed for the shifting of fear away from the people. The Soviet government found itself making unwanted concessions to striking miners throughout the country in ever increasing numbers. Large demonstrations took place around the USSR, as people learned that not only could they openly protest without being arrested, but their cause, which was often nationalism, would even receive media coverage.

The effect that media coverage had on the people was very important. The First USSR Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) that met in May-June 1989 was not going to be televised live until Yeltsin and other liberal reformers forced the issue. The reformers felt that, without television coverage, the Congress would be void of debate and turn into a ceremonial event. <sup>109</sup> Because of the television coverage, this was definitely not the case.

John Stuart Mill taught that one of the crucial roles of any legislative assembly was to inform the public and stimulate political debate. This the [CPD] achieved with a vengeance. Operating with greater glasnost than the British House of Commons, it allowed its proceedings to be televised live. The Soviet people were transfixed in front of their television sets, watching the spectacle of their lives. <sup>110</sup>

The effect of the Congress on the people was notable. Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of Leningrad, stated that: "The political awareness of people changed more in three weeks



than in the preceding fifty years." <sup>111</sup> Yeltsin echoed this sentiment: "On the day the Congress opened, they were one sort of people; on the day that it closed they were different people." <sup>112</sup> Perhaps Martin Malia summed it up best: "Fear of state authority had almost vanished during the summer after the Congress, and with it, so it seemed, the regime's ability to govern." <sup>113</sup>

Another milestone event in the shift of fear was the Moscow demonstration on 28 March 1991. The demonstration was outlawed by Prime Minister Pavlov. Other future members of the GKChP spoke out, warning the people not to participate. <sup>114</sup> Gorbachev even issued a presidential decree that removed the Moscow militia from the control of the RSFSR and placed it under the USSR MVD. Yet at least 100,000 Russians defied the ban and the 50,000 troops that had been assembled, to peacefully march through Moscow in support of Yeltsin and Russian nationalism. Izvestiya called the government's actions "disgraceful," stating that the authorities were demonstrating "powerlessness, fear before their own people, an inability and even unwillingness to talk with them." <sup>115</sup>

As the fear shifted and the public became more mobilized, Boris Yeltsin solidified his role as leader of the opposition. Yeltsin's leadership was legitimized following his election as the RSFSR President on 12 June,

making him the first democratically elected leader in all of Russian history. And when the coup began, Yeltsin wore his mantle of legitimacy very well. The GKChP had no such mantle to wear, even though the committee tried hard to appear constitutional. This concern shown by the GKChP over its legality is another indicator of how much the Soviet Union had changed. The GKChP seemed generally concerned that its actions appear legal, not just within the country, but to the West as well. Until this time, any change of leadership within the Soviet Union was made with a noticeable lack of concern for Western and domestic perceptions.

An interesting note about Yeltsin's use of his legitimacy is that during the coup, Yeltsin never issued orders concerning the USSR, but only the RSFSR. Yeltsin continually called for Gorbachev's reinstatement, and he qualified many of his decrees, stating that they were only in effect until the USSR's constitutional order was restored. <sup>114</sup> This was an attempt by Yeltsin not to appear to be replacing Gorbachev, for that is what the GKChP was attempting. Yeltsin also received support from Western leaders, most notably President Bush. The two leaders spoke together daily after the coup started. Yeltsin reportedly stated that "he wasn't sure what his fate would be but he desperately needed continued public support from

Bush." 117 Bush's telephone diplomacy continued throughout the coup, and it has been recently been revealed that the US President even called Gorbachev sometime in June to personally warn him that, according to US intelligence sources, a hard-line coup was imminent. 118

In retrospect, the actions of the GKChP in August were condemned to fail for a multitude of reasons. The lie of communism was dead, and even the GKChP seemed to realize this: at no time, in any of their decrees or at their press conference, did the GKChP mention Marxism-Leninism, communism, or socialism. 119 These men called themselves conservatives, yet there was no ideology for them to conserve. All the GKChP desired was to preserve their privileges. The lack of ruthlessness with which the committee dealt with the media and the military prevented a return to the terror which was needed to control the people and destroy the nationalism movement. And without the terror, the people were free of fear. A significant portion of the people of the Soviet Union resisted the coup, and, for at least 72 hours, resisted their alleged historical submissiveness. This resistance killed the coup.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

In a recently published biography of Boris Yeltsin, Reuters correspondent John Morrison made the analogy that the Soviet coup was similar to the explosion of the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl--both events were inevitable, yet avoidable.

Just as Chernobyl was the inevitable product of a nuclear system that ignored worldwide safety standards, the coup was also a disaster waiting to happen. It was the meltdown of a system that was not designed to withstand the stresses and strains of the democratic reforms to which Gorbachev had subjected it.

But it was a coup that could have been prevented. Like the operators in the control room at Chernobyl, who ignored the warning lights that flashed at them and the dials pointing to red, Gorbachev failed to spot the signs of approaching disaster. Gorbachev ignored warnings from Eduard Shevardnadze and Alexander Yakovlev, previously his fellow-architects of reform, that hard-liners were preparing a return to the old ways. 120

Gorbachev repeatedly ignored warnings due to his confidence in his ability to skirt disaster. Gorbachev's place in history is secure, if for no other reason than bringing about the massive changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This change was made possible due to Gorbachev's skill as a master politician. During the course of one year, from August 1990 to August 1991, Gorbachev moved back and forth between various political factions with

supreme skill. The swing to the right that occurred in the Fall and Winter of 1990-1991 was, to a certain extent, forced on Gorbachev by the conservatives. Yet Gorbachev seemed to think that he could use this to his advantage. Gorbachev wanted to have it all--he wanted reform, yet he also wanted to be able to save the empire. To stay in power in order to meet his dual goals, Gorbachev had to avoid a general election to the post of President of the USSR, for he conceivably would have lost his post. By appointing conservatives to key positions, Gorbachev was able to retain his powers throughout the winter. Then, in the spring, the Union Treaty was renegotiated, and Gorbachev resumed his position as the leader of reforms. Gorbachev knew that this would not be acceptable to the conservatives, and it can be assumed that he expected them to lash out at him.

The expected backlash occurred on 17-21 June, when the conservatives took action in the Supreme Soviet to transfer powers from Gorbachev to Prime Minister Pavlov. Support was given to Pavlov by KGB Chief Kryuchkov, Defense Minister Yazov, and Interior Minister Pugo. The Soyuz coalition of People's Deputies also supported this attempt to usurp Gorbachev's power. This legislative putsch failed only after Gorbachev made an emotional speech to the assembly, stating that the conservatives were "completely divorced from reality." <sup>121</sup> Gorbachev later stated that he did not fear the hardliners, and that "society will reject

them." <sup>122</sup> The most revealing quote of the entire affair was spoken outside the assembly hall after the movement by the conservatives was defeated. Gorbachev met with reporters, surrounded by Yazov, Pugo, and Kryuchkov. Appearing relieved and happy, Gorbachev announced that: "the coup is over." <sup>123</sup> Gorbachev seemed to think that he had finally defeated the conservatives. With supreme confidence, Gorbachev felt that the way was clear to continue reforms and to get the Union Treaty signed in August. This error in judgment was perhaps the biggest mistake of Gorbachev's political career. So sure of his defeat of the conservatives, Gorbachev did not relieve any of them from their duties for attempting the constitutional coup. Gorbachev's overconfidence allowed him to ignore the warning signals of the August coup, much like the operators at Chernobyl. The August coup and its aftermath did not just destroy Gorbachev's overconfidence, it destroyed his empire.

The causes of failure for the GKChP should serve as a lesson for possible future attempts to seize power in any of the republics. The GKChP failed because they had nothing with which they could motivate the people. The strongest ideology in the Soviet Union today is nationalism, and the GKChP had no means of exploiting this attitude. The GKChP was motivated to attempt to save the empire, as well as to control the economy and enforce law and order within the



country. The empire has now crumbled, yet the economic and discipline problems remain. The possibility of a future attempt to rule with an iron fist should not be taken lightly.

A prominent Russian legal scholar has commented that the people of the Soviet Union "suffered victory" in the August coup. <sup>124</sup> The near term future of the former Soviet Union is full of potentially disastrous questions. What will be done about the economy and market reforms? What about housing and pay for the Armed Forces, which is an organization that must be kept satisfied to avoid confrontation? Will there be food riots? What will happen to the estimated 25 million Russians who live outside the RSFSR? These and many other questions are unanswerable at this time. Yet it is erroneous to state that the people suffered victory. What the people suffered was years of totalitarian rule. The victory that the people earned was a rejection of an attempt to return to totalitarianism. What the people do with this victory remains to be seen. As the Greek historian Polybius said over 2,000 years ago: "Those who know how to win are much more numerous than those who know how to make proper use of their victories." <sup>125</sup> The challenge to the citizens of the former USSR is to find those people who know how to capitalize on their victory in August.

## NOTES

1. Moscow Central Television First Program, 22 August 1991, "Gorbachev Holds News Conference 22 August 1991," in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report Soviet Union (FBIS), 23 August 1991, p. 25.

2. The military high command was especially stung by the sharp words of the media after the May 1987 incident concerning the flight of Mathius Rust. This led to the sacking of the Minister of Defense, S.L. Sokolov, and the appointment of GKChP member General Yazov. See Bruce Parrott "Political Change and Civil-Military Relations", Soldiers and the Soviet State edited by Timothy J. Colton and Thane Gustafson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 84-87.

3. Roman Szporluk, "Dilemmas of Russian Nationalism," Problems of Communism, July-August 1989, pp 17-18.

4. S. E. Finer, The Man on Horseback (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1962), pp. 23-85. Finer uses this term to explain a reason why the military would chose to intervene in affairs of state. The basic idea fits this particular case, except that it was not just the military that intervened, but a hard-line coalition.

5. The phrases "multiple power centers" and "multiple authority" were used by Yanaev during the GKChP press conference on the evening of 19 August 1991. See PRAVDA, 20 August 1991, "PRAVDA Reports Yanaev Press Conference," in FBIS, 21 August 1991, pp. 8-11.

6. These closed subjects included ethnic problems within the military, as well as the unofficial policy of Dedovshchina--the beating and racial hazing of new recruits.

7. Military reform programs are summarized in a variety of articles, including:

-George G. Weickhardt, "Democratization and Glasnost in the Soviet Armed Forces," Report on the USSR, 19 May 1989, pp. 10-15.

-Stephen Foye, "Role of Political Organs in Armed Forces Questioned," Report on the USSR, 11 August 1989, pp. 4-7.

-Stephen Foye, "Domestic Role of the Soviet Armed Forces Debated," Report on the USSR, 19 January 1990, pp. 7-9.

-Alexander Rahr, "Gorbachev Moves to Placate and Forestall Disgruntled Military Establishment," Report on the USSR, 16 March 1990, pp. 6-8.

-Stephen Foye, "Radical Military Reform and 'The Young Turks'," Report on the USSR, 13 April 1990, pp. 8-10.

-Major (P) Timothy L. Thomas, "The Reformist Military Deputies," Military Review, December 1990, pp. 41-48.

The writings of Karem Rash, who espouses the Elite military idea, are criticized by Mikhail Tsypkin, "Karem Rash: An Ideologue of Military Power," Report on the USSR, 3 August 1990, pp. 8-11.

8. Quentin Peel, "Decline and Fall of Economic Perestroika," The Financial Times of London, 26 January 1991, p. 8.

9. Stephen Foye, "Kulikov Denies Military Coup Rumors," RFE/RL Daily Report, 31 May 1990.

10. Alexander Rahr, "Gromov Says No Coup Possible," RFE/RL Daily Report, 5 June 1990. Also see FBIS, 26 March 1990, p. 73 and 24 April 1990, p. 74.

11. "Military Coup in the USSR?" Washington Post Weekly, 24-30 September 1990, pp. 16-17.

12. Victor Yasmann, "Internal Troops to Retain Central Command," RFE/RL Daily Report, 23 November 1990.

13. Stephen Foye, "Military Coup Rumors in Moscow," RL/RFE Daily Report, 13 September 1990.

14. Paris AFP, 13 September 1990, "Possibility of Military Coup in USSR Discussed," in FBIS, 13 September 1990, p. 47.

15. Stephen Foye, "Another Coup Warning," RL/RFE Daily Report, 21 September 1990.

16. Paris AFP, 25 September 1990, "Parliamentarians Warned of Moscow Troop Buildup," in FBIS, 26 September 1990, p. 68.

17. Madrid ABC, 28 September 1990, "Shchit Leader Cited on Coup Prospects," in FBIS, 2 October 1990, p. 59. Also see Moscow SOBESEDNIAK, 1 October 1990, "Shchit Official Defends Coup Charges," in FBIS, 5 November 1990, pp. 69-71.

18. FBIS, 26 September 1990, p. 68.

19. FBIS, 26 September 1990, p. 67. This alleged para-military group of reformers came to be known as "Program-90" or "Action Program-90." The existence of such a group appears to have been a myth.

20. Ibid.

21. Moscow Television Service, 26 September 1990, "Yazov Explains Troop Movements to Supreme Soviet," in FBIS, 27 September 1990, pp. 39-40.

22. Victor Yasmann, "Existence of KGB Combat Troops Confirmed," RL/RFE Daily Report, 1 October 1990.

23. Stephen Foye, "Committees to Investigate Troop Movements," RL/RFE Daily Report, 28 September 1990.

24. IZVESTIYA, 5 October 1990, "Commission to Investigate Coup Claims," in FBIS, 10 October 1990, p. 111.

25. Stephen Foye, "Defense Minister Blames Left for Coup Rumors," RL/RFE Daily Report, 1 October 1990.

26. Ibid.

27. Vera Tolz, "RSFSR Parliament Demands Investigation of Accusations Against Democrats," RL/RFE Daily Report, 12 October 1990.

28. Conservative press articles appeared in Krasnaya Zvezda and Sovetskaya Rossiya. See FBIS: 3 October 1990, pp. 35-36; 1 October 1990, pp. 35-38; 1 October 1990, pp. 38-39; and 5 October 1990, pp. 60-63. Liberal press articles appeared in Komsomolskaya Pravda and Sobesednik. See FBIS: 3 October 1990, pp. 36-38; 5 November 1990, pp. 69-71; and 5 October 1990, p. 52-55. Finally, for the Izvestiya article, see FBIS, 11 October 1990, pp. 70-73.

29. KOMSOMOLSKAYA PRAVDA, 12 October 1990, "Yazov Accused Over Coup-Rumor 'Exercises'," in FBIS, 12 October 1990, pp. 87-88.

30. Ibid.

31. Moscow Television Service, 19 October 1990, "Army Major Describes Troop Movements Near Moscow," in FBIS, 15 October 1990, pp. 59-60.

32. SOVETSKAYA ROSSIYA, 16 October 1990, "Officers Working to Dispel Military Coup 'Myth'," in FBIS, 16 October 1990, p. 55.

33. KOMSOMOLSKAYA PRAVDA, 28 November 1990, "Coups Commission's Final Report Questioned," in FBIS, 28 November 1990, pp. 75-77. Committee findings were also cited in KRASNAYA ZVEZDA, 26 October 1990, "Panel Says Troop Movement Incident Still Unclear," in FBIS, 30 October 1990, p. 34.

34. There is no evidence that Alksnis and Petrushenko are being looked at by the authorities investigating the August coup. The authorities seem to consider the two Colonels to be loud annoyances. At one time, then Defense Minister Yazov allegedly ordered Alksnis and Petrushenko to tone down their rhetoric, but the two Colonels refused. See Bill Keller, "Soviet Military Grows Resentful at Gorbachev's Policy of Change," New York Times, 24 December 1990, p. 1, col. 4.

35. Moscow Television Service, 16 February 1990, "Deputy Outlines Soyuz Group Principles," in FBIS, 20 February 1990, p. 46.

36. Ibid.

37. SOVETSKAYA ROSSIYA, 22 March 1990, "Soyuz Group Leader on Conservative Aims," in FBIS, 30 March 1990, pp. 54-56.

38. Elizabeth Shogren, "Kremlin's Rightist Tilt Can Be Linked to Soyuz," Los Angeles Times, 26 February 1991, p. H6, col. 1.

39. Soviet Military Biographies, compiled by the US Army's Soviet Army Study Office, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.

40. Michael Dobbs, "...A Strong Hand," Washington Post, 16 November 1990, p. A1, col. 3.

41. Ibid. A partial transcript of the meeting was printed in KRASNAYA ZVEZDA, 16 November 1990, "Servicemen Deputies Address Meeting," in FBIS, 21 November 1990, pp. 54-70.

42. Stephen Foye, "Gorbachev, the Army, and the Union," Report on the USSR, 7 December 1990, p. 2.

43. Ibid.

44. TASS, 17 November 1990, "Summary of 17 November Session," in FBIS, 19 November 1990, p. 58.



45. David Remnick, "Conservative Calls on Gorbachev to Get Tough or Step Down," Washington Post, 22 November 1990, p. A62, col. 4.

46. IZVESTIYA, 28 November 1990, "Petrushenko Ultimatum to Gorbachev Viewed," in FBIS, 11 December 1990, pp. 73-75.

47. Foye, "Gorbachev, the Army, and the Union," 7 December 1990, p. 1.

48. TASS, 3 December 1990, "Deputies Comment on Interior Minister's Removal," in FBIS, 4 December 1990, p. 15.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Bill Keller, "Gorbachev is Upset," New York Times, 21 December 1990, p. A1, col. 6.

52. Ibid.

53. Bill Keller, "Gorbachev Names A Party Loyalist to Vice-Presidency," New York Times, 27 December 1990, p. A1, col. 6.

54. Ibid.

55. Esther B. Fein, "In Hard Battle, Gorbachev Gets Aide He Choose," New York Times, 28 December 1990, p. A1, col. 5.

56. Elizabeth Teague, "Yanaev Speaks His Mind," RL/RFE Daily Report, 2 January 1991.

57. Elizabeth Teague, "Prime Minister Appointed," RL/RFE Daily Report, 15 January 1991.

58. Miriam Horn, "The Lust for Freedom that No Tank Can Kill," US News and World Report, 2 September 1991, p. 11.

59. The cartoon was described in an article written by Jacob W. Kipp, The Russian Military and National Bolshevism: Army Politicization and the Origins of the Crackdown, US Army's Soviet Army Studies Office, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, January 1991.



60. See Mikhail Gorbachev, Perestroika (Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 192-194; and John Van Oudenaren, Detente in Europe (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 354.

61. Gorbachev, p. 194.

62. David Holloway, "Gorbachev's New Thinking," Foreign Affairs, Winter 1988-1989, pp. 88-89.

63. Z. (Martin Malia) "To the Stalin Mausoleum," Daedalus, Winter 1990, pp. 322-324.

64. See Hedrick Smith, The New Russians (New York: Avon Books, 1991), p. 99; and Heinz Timmerman, "Human and Civil Rights in the Soviet Union: The International Dimension," Report on the USSR, 6 October 1989, pp. 6-8.

65. On the conservative criticism, see Baruch A. Hazan, Gorbachev and His Enemies (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 293-301; Thomas Sherlock, "Emerging Criticism of Gorbachev's Foreign Policy," Report on the USSR, 8 September 1989, pp. 18-19; Alexander Rahr, "Conservative Opposition to German Reunification," Report on the USSR, 11 May 1990, pp. 15-17; Suzanne Crow, "The Changing Soviet View of German Unification," Report on the USSR, 3 August 1990, pp. 1-4; Suzanne Crow, "The Soviet Union Knocks on Europe's Door," Report on the USSR, 16 November 1990, p. 8; and Coit D. Blacker, "The Collapse of Soviet Power in Europe," Foreign Affairs, Winter 1990-1991, pp. 97-98.

66. Especially vocal in his criticism was Colonel Viktor Alksnis, one of the leaders of the conservative Soyuz coalition within the Supreme Soviet. See, for example: London, NEW STATESMAN AND SOCIETY, 5 April 1991, "Alksnis on Leadership Mistakes," in FBIS, 9 April 1991, pp. 11-13; Berlin ADN, 6 May 1991, "Alksnis Criticizes Concessions to West," in FBIS, 8 May 1991, p. 31; and Elizabeth Shogren, "Kremlin's Rightist Tilt Can be Linked to Soyuz," Los Angeles Times, 26 February 1991, sec. H, p. 6.

67. Stephen Kinzer, "3 in Coup Feared US Dependency," New York Times, 7 October 1991, p. A7, col. 6.

68. See, for example: Francis X. Clines, "The Shevardnadze Warning: Not Just Content, but Timing," New York Times, 21 December 1990, p. A1, col. 4; and George J. Church, "Next: A Crackdown or a Breakdown," Time, 31 December 1990, pp. 21-24.

69. Suzanne Crow, "Who Lost Eastern Europe?" Report on the USSR, 12 April 1991, pp. 1-5.

70. Suzanne Crow, "Another Conservative Attack on Soviet Foreign Policy," Report on the USSR, 8 March 1991, pp. 6-7.

71. Shevardnadze's resignation speech is printed in its entirety in Moscow Domestic Service, 20 December 1990, "Resignation Speech to Congress," in FBIS, 20 December 1990, pp. 11-12.

72. See Julia Wishnevsky, "Today Vilnius, Tomorrow Moscow?" RFE/RL Daily Report, 15 January 1991; and Saulius Girnius, "Lithuania's National Salvation Committee," Report on the USSR, 25 January 1991, pp. 6-8.

73. The official US actions were a public admonishment and the postponing of a summit that had been scheduled for February. The European Community action was stronger, as they voted to postpone delivery of a large food-aid package.

74. For a good overview of the actions in the Baltics in January, see especially: Craig R. Whitney, "Gorbachev Puts Blame for Clash on Lithuanians," New York Times, 15 January 1991, p. A1, col. 1; Stephen Foye, "Gorbachev Denies Responsibility for the Crackdown," Report on the USSR, 25 January 1991, pp. 1-3; Anthony Lewis, "A Sense of Proportion," New York Times, 28 January 1991, p. A23, col. 1; and Smith, pp. 605-614. For conservative criticism of Gorbachev's hesitation, see Kaunas Radio, 23 January 1991, "Salvation Committee, 'Gorbachev Betrayed Us'," in FBIS, 23 January 1991, p. 54. Perhaps the most graphic criticism of Gorbachev was made by Colonel Viktor Alksnis of Soyuz, who said that Gorbachev was like "a surgeon starting an operation, making an incision in the body of a patient and then leaving him." Elizabeth Shogren, "Soviet Conservative Warns of Potential for Civil War," Los Angeles Times, 28 January 1991, p. A4, col. 3.

75. Stephen Foye, "A Lesson in Ineptitude: Military Backed Coup Crumbles," Report on the USSR, 30 August 1991, pp. 5-8.

76. All but nine Moscow newspapers were banned until such time that a specially created body of the GKChP was to have decided to lift the ban. This ban was established by the GKChP in its "Second Decree." The nine newspapers that were allowed to continue publishing were all either published by the Communist Party or known to be sympathetic to right wing, conservative positions. Moscow TASS International Service, 19 August 1991, "Second Decree Issues," in FBIS, 19 August 1991, p. 13.

77. Vera Tolz, "How the Journalists Responded," Report on the USSR, 6 September 1991, p. 24.

78. Moscow IZVESTIYA, 24 August 1991, "Commentary Examines Yanayev's Background," in FBIS, 29 August 1991, p. 49.

79. Moscow Central Television, 19 August 1991, "Yanayev Answers Questions at News Conference," in FBIS, 20 August 1991, pp. 2-8.

80. Ibid., p. 6.

81. Ibid., pp. 3-4.

82. Smith, p. 638.

83. Anna Husarska, "The Apartment," The New Republic, 16 September 1991, pp. 15-16.

84. Eduard Shevardnadze, "The Tragedy of Gorbachev," Newsweek, 9 September 1991, p. 30.

85. All of these items are contained in a packet of copied material that the author obtained from Mrs. Natalie Marchenko-Fryberger of the Defense Language Institute. Mrs. Marchenko-Fryberger received the packet from a lawyer who works in Yeltsin's government. Translations were done by the author.

86. Tolz, p. 25.

87. Special editions of Rossiya were included in the packet that the author obtained.

88. Mikhail Gorbachev, The August Coup (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 27.

89. Tolz, p. 25.

90. Shevardnadze, p. 30.

91. Mikhail Tsypkin, "The Soviet Military: Glasnost Against Secrecy," Problems of Communism, May-June 1991, p. 63.

92. Stephen Foye, "While Yazov Says Armed Forces Threatened," RL/RFE Daily Report, 25 June 1991.

93. Alvin Toffler, "Soviet Colonel's Scenario of Civil, Global War," San Francisco Chronicle, 3 July 1991, p. B1, col. 1.

94. Stephen Foye, "From Defending the Empire to Saving the Union," Report on the USSR, 4 January 1991, p. 11. General Gromov was fired from his post at the MVD after the coup, although he denies any involvement with the GKChP.

95. Stephen Foye, "The High Command Confronts 'New Political Thinking' at Home and Abroad," Report on the USSR, 29 March 1991, p. 26.

96. Stephen Foye, "Rhetoric from the Past: The First All-Army Party Conference," Report on the USSR, 19 April 1991, p. 7.

97. Ibid.

98. Colton and Gustafson, p. 362.

99. Gary Lee and Rick Atkinson, "Preaching a Failing Faith," Washington Post, 20 November 1990, p. A1, col. 5.

100. One estimate is that 44% of the soldiers from Russia voted for Yeltsin; Bruce B. Auster, "The Army: No Longer in Step," US News and World Report, 2 September 1991, p. 48. Another report estimated that Yeltsin received 81% of the vote in the Pacific Fleet. These numbers are especially significant in light of the fact that the Soviet Defense Ministry waged an aggressive anti-Yeltsin campaign during the election; Stephen Foye, "Gorbachev's Return to Reform: What Does it Mean for the Armed Forces?" Report on the USSR, 12 July 1991, p. 6.

101. George G. Weickhardt, "Democratization and Glasnost in the Soviet Armed Forces," Report on the USSR, 19 May 1989, p. 11.

102. John Morrison, Boris Yeltsin: From Bolshevik to Democrat (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 260-262.

103. Michael Dobbs, "Yeltsin Woos the Military," Washington Post, 2 June 1991, p. A1, col. 5.

104. Morrison, p. 286.

105. These flyers were included in the packet obtained by the author.

106. Julia Wishnevsky, "Alpha Officers Explain Motives," RL/RFE Daily Report, 3 September 1991.

107. Martin Malia discusses the death of the lie in his article written under the pseudonym "Z." "To the Stalin Mausoleum," Daedalus, Winter 1990, pp. 295-344.

108. Ibid., p. 325.

109. Morrison, p. 95.

110. Geoffrey A. Hosking, The Awakening of the Soviet Union (London: Heinemann, Ltd., 1990), p. 150.

111. Morrison, pp. 96-97.

112. Ibid.

113. Z. (Malia), p. 332.

114. Julia Wishnevsky, "Yanaev Warns Leaders of Democratic Russia," RL/RFE Daily Report, 28 March 1991. Others who spoke out in addition to Vice-President Yanaev and Prime Minister Pavlov were Minister of Internal Affairs Boris Pugo and KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov.

115. Serge Schmemmann, "A Gain for Yeltsin," New York Times, 29 March 1991, p. A1, col. 6.

116. For examples, see: Stephen Foye, "Yeltsin Takes Command of Armed Forces," RL/RFE Daily Report, 21 August 1991; Elizabeth Teague, "Yeltsin Defiant," RL/RFE Daily Report, 19 August 1991; and Moscow INTERFAX, 19 August 1991, "RSFSR Leaders Call for General Strike," in FBIS, 20 August 1991, p. 16.

117. Kenneth T. Walsh, "Bush's Brand New Phone Pal," US News and World Report, 2 September 1991, p. 55.

118. Serge Schmemmann, "Gorbachev Says Bush Called Him to Warn About Hard-Line Coup," New York Times, 13 November 1991, pg. A6, col. 3.

119. Morrison, p. 282.

120. Ibid., p. 274.

121. Alexander Rahr, "Gorbachev Defeats Hardliners," RL/RFE Daily Report, 24 June 1991.

122. Ibid.

123. David Remnick, "Gorbachev Turns Back Challenge," Washington Post, 22 June 1991, p. A1, col. 1.

124. David K. Shipler, "Report from Moscow: After the Coup," The New Yorker, 11 November 1991, p. 73.

125. Quoted from John Bartlett, Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, 15th Edition (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), p. 95.



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Additional information was obtained from video taped interviews with Colonel Viktor Alksnis on the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour on 16 and 24 July 1991, and the Cable News Network's Newsday on 20 May 1991.

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National Security Affairs (NS/LA)  
Naval Postgraduate School  
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